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ABSTRACT

For the first time, federal funding for literacy services will focus new attention on the plight of the homeless. Under the McKinney Homeless Assistance Act, each state will receive funds for literacy for the homeless. Although there are no firm estimates on how many persons are homeless, a number of indicators point to a problem of major and growing proportions. The homeless belong to three broad categories, which frequently overlap: the situational homeless, the marginal homeless, and the chronically homeless. The widespread escalation of the homeless family contains the seeds of disintegration of the very fabric of American life. Yet the majority of shelters today do not accept whole families. Illiteracy is an important element of the plight of the homeless, and provision of literacy services could make a difference. Two of the most innovative literacy programs for the homeless, Project Adaptive Literacy of the Volunteers of America of Greater New York and the Community Occupational Readiness and Placement Program in Philadelphia, provide a wide range of services of which literacy is just one, although an integral, part. Lessons learned from such programs are present in the McKinney Act in its many built-in safeguards. In addition to literacy and job training, the act will fund related transportation, child care, and counseling costs. Funded projects must be coordinated with agencies that provide a broad range of social and human services. (YLB)

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BCEL BUSINESS COUNCIL FOR EFFECTIVE LITERACY

ADULT LITERACY : PROGRAMS • PLANNING • ISSUES

A Newsletter For The Business Community

NO. 17 OCTOBER 1988

DOUBLE JEOPARDY:
Homeless & Illiterate

In New York City, a single mother and her two children live in a welfare hotel where crime, drugs, vermin, and bureaucratic regulations make their lives a living hell. In Chicago a fire destroys the apartment and all the possessions of a family already on welfare forcing them out on the street. In Charleston, a construction worker injured on the job but not covered by worker's compensation or other benefits can no longer pay the rent and he and his family are evicted. In San Antonio a former auto worker from Detroit and his two sons have been sleeping next to a highway for four months. He sells his blood twice a week, sometimes making $100 a month, to feed his children. In Allentown a laid-off steelworker sleeps in his car at night and goes to soup kitchens for food during the day. In New Orleans an unemployed couple from another state and their three children walk the streets rather than be separated. While seeking help from various city agencies, their car is vandalized and their few belongings stolen. In Denver two low-income parents are laid off and their new jobs do not pay enough to meet their rent. Because the state does not provide assistance to two-parent families, the family is forced to split up.

These are just a few of the growing number of "new homeless"–people who, through no fault of their own, almost overnight find themselves without food and shelter. Americans have always cherished the notion that one of our most basic rights is having a home of our own. But for millions of us this has become an

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The illustrations shown above and on pp. 4 and 5 of this article are from *Working With Homeless People: A Guide for Staff and Volunteers*. Revised June 1988. Columbia University Community Services. They are part of a series by John Jenkins, a former homeless man currently working as a free-lance artist in New York City. The guide is available at no cost from CUCS, 635 West 115th Street, New York, NY 10025 (212) 280-5746.

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DOUBLE JEOPARDY

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unattainable dream. A rising tide of homelessness and hunger is sweeping the country. The evidence meets our eyes every day on every street in any large city.

At the grassroots level, churches, unions, social service organizations, and other community-based groups have been wrestling for some years to try and provide basic food and shelter for the growing numbers who need it. Only in the last couple of years have municipal and state funds been provided for other services needed by the homeless. And now, for the first time, federal funding for literacy services will focus new attention on their plight. Under the McKinney Homeless Assistance Act, some $14 million has been appropriated for literacy and an additional $7 million has just been recommended for next year. Beginning this month, each state will receive literacy-for-the-homeless funds based on the number of adults in its population aged 16 and older and out of school. This therefore seems a good time to take a look at homelessness, what it means, and how illiteracy fits into the total picture.

Why Homelessness?

According to the U.S. Conference of Mayors [*A Status Report On Homeless Families in America's Cities*, May 1987 and *The Continuing Growth of Hunger, Homelessness and Poverty in America's Cities: 1987*, December 1987] drastic cutbacks in federal housing assistance, job training programs, food stamps, health care programs, and help for the de-institutionalized mentally ill are among the major causes of homelessness–"ripping huge holes in the so-called 'safety-net.' " Federal housing assistance, for example, has dropped over 75 percent, from $25 billion to less than $8 billion, during the 1980s. Noting that construction of new housing for the poor has come to a virtual halt, resulting in a decline in home ownership, soaring rents, and co-op conversion of old housing stock, *Newsweek* (issue of 1/4/88) concluded that the outlook for the next decade is "very bleak." The mayoral reports cited above carry this same message.

The Numbers Game

Not surprisingly, given the changing nature and scope of homelessness and the newness of public attention to it, as well as the transiency of much of the homeless population, there are no firm estimates on how many persons are homeless. [Note: The U.S. Census Bureau plans a count as part of its 1990 population census.] Nevertheless, a number of indicators point to a problem of major and growing proportion. They reveal a fairly grim picture:

The National Coalition for the Homeless in Washington, D.C. estimates the number to be about 3 million currently, with many more struggling at the brink. But information from the U.S. Conference of Mayors (USCM) suggests that the count may be substantially higher, given the high correlation between poverty and homelessness. According to USCM, more than 32 million (1 out of 7 Americans) lived below the poverty level in 1987–representing an increase of 3 million since 1980. *Those whose poverty results from low wages, the "working poor," constitute the fastest growing portion of the poor.*

By the end of this year, homelessness is expected to have increased in all but two of 26 cities surveyed by USCM only a year ago. Here is what officials in four of those cities say:

• Portland: Economically, things are becoming worse for very low-income, low-skilled people. There are insufficient entry-level jobs available, and the low-paying jobs do not provide sufficient income to support a family.

• Norfolk: High rents, the demolition of low-income housing which is not being replaced, and evictions of persons already at a low-income level...will lead to an increase in homelessness. Also, until the criminal justice system better meets the needs of victims of domestic violence, the number of battered women who are homeless will increase.

• Phoenix: The city's nationally publicized relatively-low unemployment rates and mild winter weather will continue to attract persons from other parts of the country that are economically depressed, particularly Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Texas.

• Nashville: Some local agencies serving homeless persons report ever-increasing waiting lists for their services. Other agencies indicate that some of the services needed to enable the homeless to re-enter the mainstream of community life are not available to the degree needed to address adequately the problems which create or contribute to homelessness.

USCM stresses that about *one-third of the homeless are families with children and this is the fastest growing segment of the homeless population.* USCM also estimates that some 23 percent of the demand for emergency shelter goes unmet. In nearly two-thirds of the cities, emergency shelters must turn away people for lack of resources. In fact, according to USCM, the average wait for assisted housing is nearly two years, and 65 percent of the cities have closed their waiting lists.

A new report on homelessness just delivered to Congress by the National Academy of Sciences gives further evidence of the scale of the problem. The study estimates conservatively that at least 735,000 Americans and some 100,000 children are homeless on any given night, and that as many as 2 million people are homeless for one night or more during the course of a year.

Who Are The Homeless?

To many, the homeless fit old stereotypes for whom the public need not feel responsible: the drunk in the doorway, the eccentric bag lady, the crack addict panhandling, the disoriented and wandering mental patient. Certainly these sub-groups in the population have not vanished, but there have been significant changes in the composition of the homeless. For example, USCM says that almost half of the homeless are single men, often unemployed or underemployed. Some are disabled vets or dislocated workers. Again, the most dramatic change is that a full third are families and children, and their numbers are growing. Charleston reported a 144 percent increase in this category in one year, Providence a 75 percent increase, Philadelphia a 66 percent increase.

Barbara Pitts, Director of Volunteers at Volunteers of America of Greater New York (a group with a nationally-recognized track record in providing literacy and other services to the homeless) finds it helpful to

think of the homeless as belonging in one of three broad categories, which frequently overlap:

The Situational Homeless are people who are getting by and even doing well until one unexpected blow levels them. They might be farmers who lose their farms, steelworkers in Pennsylvania, miners in Appalachia, oil workers in Texas, auto workers in Detroit and other dislocated workers whose skills aren't marketable anymore. Sometimes a serious illness or injury may wipe out the bank account or a fire destroy their dwelling. Many families fall into this category. Usually they can get back on their feet with a little help and direction. But sometimes, they can't make it back up and slip instead into the second category.

The Marginal Homeless are individuals who drift in and out of homelessness repeatedly. This group includes disadvantaged persons such as high school dropouts, one-parent families, teen mothers, non-English-speaking immigrants and migrant workers, battered wives, drug and alcohol abusers. With the right kind of sustained, comprehensive help, this group can also return to the mainstream of society.

The Chronically Homeless are those with severe psychiatric impairment, the destitute elderly, and persons probably needing some form of minimal supervision and possibly institutionalization all their lives. These people do not belong in shelters, and should have community-supported facilities designed to address their long-term needs.

What Does It Mean To Be Homeless?

To lose one's dwelling is really to lose everything and to begin a downward spiral that, without help, can end in total devastation. [Note: Jonathan Kozol's recent book, *Rachel and Her Children*, gives a shattering, indeed enraging, account of such devastation.] One New York City shelter resident put it this way: "I was so far down I had to look up to see the bottom." Having no place to call one's own, to share good times and bad with family and friends, to store one's possessions, to mount a job search or any other constructive agenda, changes the way you look at yourself, and the way others look at you. Moreover, the longer a person is homeless, the more likely he or she is to develop psychiatric and physical problems from stress and malnutrition. Many experts have pointed out that to be homeless means that "you are essentially alone." Links with family, relatives, friends, and neighborhoods have been severed. The person is totally at the mercy of others. Without a fixed address, in many states homeless people even lose the most basic right of every citizen–the right to vote, and therefore, to influence their own fate.

The Special Plight Of Families

The widescale escalation of the homeless family contains the seeds of disintegration of the very fabric of American life. More than any other group, according to the experts, a family's life is turned upside down and can be virtually destroyed if it stays homeless very long.

Yet the majority of shelters today do not accept whole families. In Los Angeles, it has been reported that only 51 of the county's 215 shelters accept families and only 16 accept families with fathers. To complicate matters, families among the Situational Homeless are the most likely to be hidden from view. For example, in rural areas they may live in the woods or in vans, or split up and stay with relatives. Furthermore, homelessness places a constant strain on what may remain of family relations–often resulting in domestic violence, family breakups, and placement of children in foster care. Children attending school often have unstable attendance, learning problems, and poor physical health and personal hygiene, and they have a high truancy rate. Some children are not in school at all, usually because their transiency leaves them without a fixed address. In Los Angeles, according to USCM, a recent study found that of those old enough to attend school, 43 percent were not currently attending.

What Role Literacy?

Considering the diversity of the homeless population, its overwhelming needs, and the complexity of homelessness, it seems appropriate to ask whether illiteracy is an important element of their plight and whether the provision of literacy services can make any difference. As the remainder of this article will show, the answer is "yes" in both cases, provided that program designers are totally realistic about their role and their goals.

Not all homeless people have basic skills problems, of course, but no one doubts that many do. Barbara Pitts maintains that "very few people yet acknowledge illiteracy as part of the problem." She points out that "when you consider that millions of the currently unemployed in this country are considered functionally illiterate, it makes you wonder how many of these people are passing in and out of shelters or living in other homeless arrangements."

The experience of VOA of Greater New York (Volunteers of America, the national organization, was founded in 1896 and operates in 170 cities all over the country), is telling. The branch serves about 2,000 people a day and is the largest private provider of shelter services to the homeless in New York City. At one site, a 1,055 bed facility on Wards Island, VOA-NYC did a random sampling of 122 people, using the reading assessment and word recognition tests of Literacy Volunteers of America. Roughly 60 percent scored below the 5th grade level. "Added to general staff observations," concludes Pitt, "this has convinced us that basic literacy skills are greatly lacking among this population and that this deficit is a major cause of homelessness." Others consulted by BCEL report findings similar to VOA's. (It is worth recalling that a recent Ford Foundation study–see BCEL newsletter issue of July 1988–establishes a definite causal relationship between poor basic skills and many other social problems, including the inability to get better paying jobs.)

Two Model Literacy Approaches: Some Guiding Principles

So what is to be done on the literacy front in light of the many problems and desperate conditions facing the homeless? A Chinese proverb says "Give a man a fish and he has a meal for a night. Teach a man to fish and he can feed his family forever." This seems to be the philosophy behind two of the most innovative literacy programs for the homeless, Project Adaptive Literacy (PAL) of VOA of Greater New York, and the Community Occupational Readiness and Placement Program in Philadelphia. Both programs recognize that a bed and a meal for one night will not solve anything, and both provide a wide range of services of which literacy is just one, although an integral, part.

Take PAL. Since June 1986, this successful literacy program has been operating at VOA's Bowery Shelter for homeless recovering alcoholic men and at its Brandon House single residence shelter, both in Manhattan. Barbara Pitts has been to Washington and elsewhere to testify on the elements and achievements of PAL and offers many insights into what works.

Be Sensitive. "This is not your ordinary illiterate population. There have to be certain sensitivities in mind before a program is started, to encourage people to come forward. To many homeless, being an alcoholic is more socially acceptable than being illiterate."

Strive To Build Trust And Confidence. "Most of the homeless have had bad experiences with authority figures and are skeptical and hostile of 'programs' to help them. They are also deeply isolated. They need to be treated differently than other kinds of groups. It's amazing to see their faces when a volunteer comes in and says, 'I'm here just for you. How can I help you?' This is the start of a new cycle of trust and hope."

Package All Services & Bring Them To The People. "In most cases today, services for the homeless are piecemeal. People are expected to go to one place for a meal, another for medical attention, another for clothing, another for housing help, another for tutoring. This is especially hard in areas where transportation is not easily available and when people are worried about where they will spend the night. All of VOA's programs for the homeless are multi-service and 90 percent of its clients' needs are met at the shelters. Education efforts have the greatest chance of success if they take place where people get 24-hour help."

Think Small. "This population requires long-term, one-on-one attention. Our literacy component has only included 35 persons so far, but within that number only three have gone back to the street or had an alcohol relapse. Many have gone on to find jobs, to pursue advanced schooling, or become peer tutors. And 99 percent of students and teachers have kept their initial 3-6 month commitment."

Select Tutors/Teachers With Care. The PAL program is offered on a one-to-one volunteer basis with supplies paid for by committed volunteers. All the tutors are professionals drawn from area banks, advertising and insurance agencies, and corporations. They are all hand-picked by Pitts. "I look for a special kind of person with sensitivity and the right motivation to work with the homeless." Tutors go through an intensive two-day training session and are regularly evaluated. Sometimes a volunteer will be directed to another type of literacy work because he or she is not right for the program. "When I first started working here I didn't know too much about shelters or homeless people except seeing them on the streets. I pictured a dark and dingy place and unkempt people and I was really pleasantly surprised," says Priscilla, a volunteer tutor. Unlike some depressing welfare hotels and shelters, VOA's shelters place a high priority on cleanliness and residents themselves

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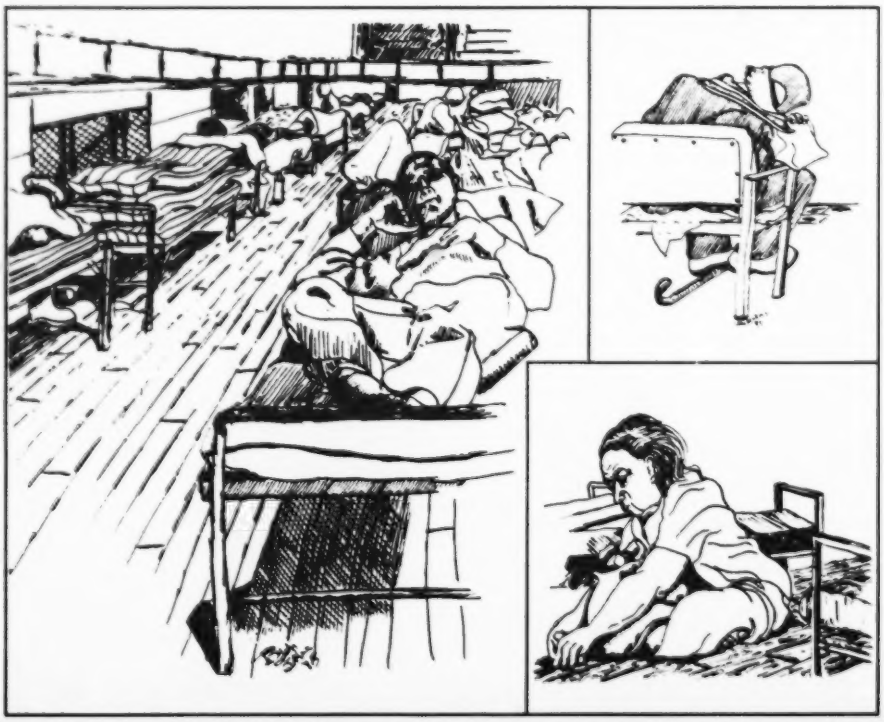

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keep their "home" immaculately clean in order to take pride in their surroundings and build a positive psychological atmosphere.

Set Realistic Criteria. The homeless are not interested in upping their reading level from one grade to another. They want a job and housing first, so the content of the literacy sessions needs to be based on each individual's needs and goals. For example, John, a 52-year-old man who read on a second grade level, had never had the confidence to go on a job interview or fill out a job application. His goal at VOA was to do this and work in the textile industry. He and his tutor focused on this and eventually he was able to have a successful interview, get a job in his chosen field, and find housing. Willie, a recovering alcoholic, dreamed of becoming a registered nurse but passing the school's entrance exam and admissions interview seemed impossible to him. After two months of work with a PAL tutor and heavy concentration on his writing and interpersonal skills, he was able to enter nursing school and has remained sober for a year.

Build In Evaluation & Follow Up. Besides monitoring tutors and students, periodic evaluation including outside agency evaluation enables VOA to make adjustments in the program. In addition, even when students find employment, they are encouraged to continue in the program and close ties are maintained to help the client sustain the achievement level reached.

A second model effort, the Community Occupational Readiness and Placement Program (CORPP) in Philadelphia, has also achieved national recognition. CORPP, with its primary focus on job training, works closely with the Mayor's Commission on Literacy, the central coordinating agency for all literacy services in the city, including other area programs for the homeless. Realizing that the homeless feel profoundly alone, CORPP turns students into a peer support group similar to Narcotics Anonymous. People in need of jobs and homes can join if they are over 18 and read at a 6th grade level. Students attend five hours a day for 11 weeks, receiving vocational and basic skills training as well as a daily stipend based on attendance. All instruction is individualized with one-on-one tutoring. CORPP also provides counseling services and has a resource person on-site to help with housing, health care, and other needs. "This help is a lot more than a name and address," notes Bob Gay, Executive Director. After completion of the training, the focus turns to job placement and retention.

The CORPP program serves about 180 homeless a year and 35 percent find and keep jobs. Next year, CORPP plans to have "open-entry-and-ended" programs where clients can enter at any level and receive individually-paced instruction as long as they need it.

The Potential Of The McKinney Act

Lessons learned in the PAL, CORPP, and other such programs have been heeded in the McKinney Act judging from the number of safeguards built into the legislation. For example, in addition to literacy and job training, the Act will fund related transportation, child care, and counseling costs. Moreover, it requires that any project funded coordinate with agencies which provide a broad range of social and human services–health care, entitlement help, emotional counseling, drug and alcohol rehabilitation.

"We know that education is not the first priority of someone who is hungry," says Sarah Newcomb, Program Analyst at the U.S. Department of Education, "or of someone with medical problems, or who has been abused by her husband." "So the education program is tied to all these other support services to provide a fruitful environment for the homeless to fulfill their potential and rejoin society." Newcomb stresses that technically the homeless have always been eligible to participate in federally-funded ABE programs, but they have had to seek out the programs themselves and be persistent in coming back in the face of great odds. The literacy provisions of the McKinney Act were consciously designed to create basic skills for the homeless in the context of their special circumstances.

For most states receiving McKinney funds, this will be the first official attempt to link literacy with homeless programs. Others will continue to build on efforts already underway. Funds will go to each state's Department of Education which will in turn have the option of contracting with local service providers or shelters directly, or working through other granting agencies. Joan Seamon, Literacy Coordinator of the Illinois State Department of Education notes that "while I do not see the federal government putting massive amounts of money into literacy for any special population group, linked with state funds the McKinney money should serve as a prime catalyst to generate other sources of funding and support."

Because of their size, the five states getting the largest grants are New York, California, Texas, Illinois, and Pennsylvania. There will be great variety in projects from state to state, as the plans for three of these five states suggest. Illinois, for example, will request proposals for model programs, and education agencies are expected to subgrant the funds and work closely with community-based organizations to carry out the Act as effectively as possible. Between 50-75 percent of the funds will go to Chicago where the need is greatest. In Texas, which is divided into 63 adult education regions with one school serving as fiscal agent for each area, the fiscal agent will work with the homeless to encourage new outreach efforts, perhaps going into shelters and residences and bringing multiple services, especially for Hispanics who make up 20 percent of the state's population. New York State has been running shelters and bringing diverse programs to the homeless for several years, especially in Albany where educational programs were put in place three years ago along with job development and other services. The programs were well received and served some 500 clients in seven Albany shelters. Unfortunately, due to the transient nature of the homeless population, assessment was difficult and progress was not tracked in a methodical way. The State Education Department plans to work closely with the Department of Social Services to determine how the McKinney funds will be used. Some 75 percent will go to New York City, where the problem is especially urgent. Here, the Community Development Agency, the New York City Board of Education, and other groups will distribute funds to groups selected as best meeting the Act's requirements.

Concluding Thoughts

This brings us back to where we started. It is too soon to make any predictions about how the McKinney Act literacy funds will actually be spent at the state level or to speculate on the results. But everyone consulted in the preparation of this article agrees that the effort is an important first step. Some do not think the prospects great for continued literacy funding under the Act, but others are more hopeful.

In any case, those called upon to provide new or expanded literacy services for the homeless have a tough job ahead and they need to be constantly aware of the difficult context in which they will be working. They, and the social service, job training, and governmental agencies with whom they must work, will in most cases be charting new territory.

That the stakes are high is obvious. It certainly bears repeating that literacy services alone will not turn the problem of homelessness around. But they will help if offered hand in hand with new programs to provide job training, health care, affordable housing, and to overcome poverty and hunger. The challenge in each of these areas is daunting, and a key, as the U.S. Conference of Mayors assesses the situation, is for stronger federal policy and funding in all of these areas–as a sustained national priority. ■